

The Evolution

of Parenting Education in the College Counseling Process

By Frank D. Sachs
Director of College Counseling
 The Blake School, MN

I love history. I read it for pleasure and constantly cruise the bargain shelves looking for new history books to buy.

It really doesn't matter if it is American, European or Af-

rican history. I love to read them all. So when I begin to think about a way to explain how the process of educating parents about the college admission process has evolved during the last 30 years, it was only natural to search for a historical reference. Accordingly, I have divided my recollections and observations of how this process has changed into three historical periods: the Dark Ages, the Renaissance and the Modern Era, as yet untitled by historians.

The Dark Ages

This period of history occurred from around 400 to 1300 AD in Europe, particu-

larly the era between 400 and 900. It was a time when the growth of real knowledge was stifled. It was a backward and feudal time when Western Civilization came close to disappearing. That knowledge survived at all was due to the efforts of learned monks from the Catholic Church. These monks and their monasteries protected and preserved the knowledge accumulated from previous ages until a time came when it could be shared more freely. For me, this represents the time period in the college application process, when I was in high school, college and just the beginning my education career in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

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Students at my high school were very focused on attending college and most of my friends' parents were like mine who naturally expected that I would attend college after high school. However, here was where the process differs from today's: for my parents' information about my college search was whatever I told them. They knew nothing about the process and had no interest in learning about it. At my high school there were no parent information nights, no college newsletters, no handouts to take home, no computer search programs, no Web sites, no college videos, no test prep programs, few visits from admission officers and no (at least to my knowledge) common application. There may have been early decision programs, but I was unaware of them. Whatever meetings occurred with the counselors at my school were either at the request of the student or his/her parent.

My parents were pretty typical of these Dark Ages. They had attended college in the late 1930s and early 1940s, one had graduated, and one left school and went off to war. To them college was something optional (although I was expected to go) and there was no real pressure to achieve a certain prize. In fact, as I began to think about where and whether I wanted to go to college, I discovered they were leaving it entirely up to me. Throughout my senior year they never once met with or spoke to me or my counselor about my plans, until I had completed the process. I then met with my parents to discuss my choices. They informed me that it was nice that I had applied to these schools, but, after reviewing the price tags for each, they were paying for me to attend my local state university. So much for my parents' search for status symbols and prestige in my personal Dark Ages. When I dared to question why, I was told "After all, it's not like you got into Harvard." In retrospect, I guess there was a certain status to which even they might have been susceptible.

The Renaissance

The period that followed the Dark Ages, but preceded the Modern Era of European history, was called the Renaissance. It is generally agreed that it occurred from around 1300 to 1700 AD. The Renaissance swept aside customs and institutions that had dominated the continent for close to 1,000 years. It was a time of learning, as new ideas and attitudes arose and began to diffuse to others across traditional boundaries. As I view the college admission process, the Renaissance began in the late 1970s and early 1980s when the need for parent information programs emerged. As with the historical Renaissance, it began slowly and faced some resistance, but one thing was becoming evident. Instead of the process being exclusively student driven, there was now an increasing need to involve and inform parents. At my school it started slowly and even as late as 1989, we still had only one parent night, which occurred in April of the junior year. During this evening, we introduced the college counseling staff, conducted a discussion of the school's role in college planning and the parents' role in the college admission process. Later we

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added a presentation by a local director of college admission to discuss admission from the college's point of view. The presentations were always followed by a question and answer period. It was during this period that we began to notice that parents were no longer the docile people of the past, that they were becoming more interested in understanding the college admission process. As I reflect, this represented our first real hint for the need to change our customs and institutional behaviors in regard to parental communication during this important process. The reason for this change in parental perspective can, in part, be explained by their need to be educated about the changes in the college admission process since they were college bound. Parents in the early 1980s had been schooled in the 1950s at a time when certain high schools were viewed as feeder schools for selective colleges and universities. Back then, college admission had been much less competitive and many of these parents were unaware that the process had undergone a significant change beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This was a time when selective institutions were forced to open their doors to the greater American population. It quickly became evident that high schools needed to find better ways to explain and involve parents in the college process. A new era began to emerge.

The Modern Era, or The Millennial Era

In Western history, the modern era is the time beginning around 1700 and continuing until today. It is the period of colonization, enlightened despots and the democratization of the world. It is an era marked by ever increasing knowledge, and heightened communication techniques to share that knowledge worldwide. So how has my school changed in its approach to parent education about the college process in what some term the Millennial Era? Today we offer our parents an opportunity to learn from the college counseling staff in a structured setting, no fewer than seven times between grades nine and 12. We want to make sure that our students and parents are well informed about the process, rather than leave them in the dark about what they and their child can reasonably hope to achieve. Our program, which begins in the sophomore year, is as follows:

Tenth Grade

In the spring of the sophomore year, we conduct our first exclusive meeting for sophomore parents. We have affectionately

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dubbed this night "Hello, Goodbye." Its proper title is "The Sophomore Parent College Night." This evening serves three purposes. First, we introduce all parents to the overall college counseling program, presenting them with a timeline of activities that will take place for them and their child. Second, we discuss the comprehensive academic plan for their student that was sent home with their child's third quarter grades. We do this by using three examples of potential academic plans with varying degrees of academic challenge. The key words during this part of the presentation are *appropriately challenging* as we want parents to realize that it is important that their children take appropriately challenging courses and not to be concerned about what the most selective colleges require if that is not appropriate for their child. The final part of the presentation is a parent speaker from the most recent graduated class. The speaker's role is to calm the rising tide of anxiety by assuring parents they will get through the process, survive, and that they are in good hands with the school's counseling staff. We also want the speaker to stress to parents that if they have not yet heard from the college counseling staff, that it is not yet the appropriate time for us to enter their lives.

Eleventh Grade

During this year we conduct three programs for parents. The first takes place in the fall and is titled, "The Junior Parent College Night." During the course of this evening we briefly review the college counseling curriculum for the junior year and then we present the centerpiece of the evening which is a videotape we had professionally produced. In it, Dick Moll, former executive director of admission at Vassar College (NY), explains how one "Plays the College Admissions Game" in two parts. Part one is "What the student should consider in choosing a college" and part two is "How the colleges evaluate and choose their students." We have found this to be an excellent educational tool for parents as it helps them to begin to develop appropriate ex-

pectations about what their children can reasonably achieve in the admissions process. It also helps to introduce our recurring maxim that "college is a match to be made, not a prize to be won." In January of the junior year, we sponsor our second information session, "The Junior Parent College Breakfast." The breakfast meeting theme is always "The Importance of the College Visit." It features a guest speaker from a selective college or university, who discusses why it is important to visit a college campus before deciding where to apply. Again the thrust of the program is to reinforce our theme that "college is a match, not a prize." Our final Junior Parent Night occurs in February and is titled, "For Athletes Only." As the name implies, it is an evening for students who desire to participate in varsity sports on the Division I, Division II or Division III level. The evening consists of presentations from coaches and athletic directors of local DI, DII and DIII schools. They speak about what they look for in student athletes and most importantly about the best way to get a coach's attention if the student wants to play a sport in college.

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We feature two guest speakers from different types of colleges. The first is from a highly selective school and the second is a representative from our local state university system. Together they provide parents with a realistic view of college admission from two perspectives. We find this helps parents to again see college as “a match, not a prize.”

Twelfth Grade

During the senior year, we conduct three additional informational programs for parents. The first, in the fall is titled, “Senior Parent College Night.” This is really our last chance to get the message across about what might be reasonable expectations for students as they go through the college application process. We feature two guest speakers from different types of colleges. The first is from a highly selective school and the second is a representative from our local state university system. Together they provide parents with a realistic view of college admission from two perspectives. We find this helps parents to again see college as “a match, not a prize.” The next program, which occurs later in the fall, is our annual Financial Aid Night. During this evening, a local financial aid officer presents all the important information parents need to know about applying for financial aid. We make sure that they focus on the difference in federal and private school methodology. Our final parent information evening takes place in March of the senior year and is titled, “The Senior Parent Transition Night.” This evening has taken several incarnations. We have used videos, guest speakers and have even explored an encounter group format, but the theme is

always the same: What is the transition process like for seniors? We discuss topics like: acceptance and rejection from college, breaking away from home and high school, mood swings, depression, senior slump and senioritis. A major theme of the evening is always how parents can best weather these changes and remain supportive of their children at the same time. This is, I am sorry to report, not usually a well attended evening. However, those parents who do attend often comment that it is a very useful program.

All today's parents are really asking is that they be well informed. Our response has been to give those who need it, more than enough opportunities to become educated and understand the process.

Conclusion

In some way, the college counseling process has become easier in the Modern Age in terms of parental perspectives. I think this is because the parents of today's students grew up in the 1960s and know that the admission process has changed. They know the process is much fairer today than in their parents' day or even their own day. They realize that today, admission to college is based more on the “what you bring to the table” than the “who you are or where you went to school.” All today's parents are really asking is that they be well informed. Our response has been to give those who need it, more than enough opportunities to become educated and understand the process. However, it is important to note that the information evenings cannot stand alone. The college counselor must also find other ways to communicate with parents. These can include frequent mailings and newsletters to keep parents and students up to date and well informed. As I project into the future, I really don't know where we will go during the next era of college counseling. But if I have learned anything over the ages, be they Dark, Renaissance or Modern, it is that if we want to shape reasonable student and parental expectations, we must be prepared to communicate, and when in doubt, communicate some more.